

# The Religion of Thomas Jefferson

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*Thomas Jefferson's religious beliefs remain a point of contention in contemporary political discourse, with actors on many different sides of religious debate seeking to claim him as an advocate for their position. In this paper, I attempt to understand Jefferson's beliefs in his own words, examining his writings on spirituality, religious institutions, Christianity, miracles, and morality in both his letters to friends and colleagues, as well as his own abridged version of the bible. Though Jefferson was far from orthodox, I argue that he never saw himself as anything but a Christian; he simply had strong and independent convictions about what being a Christian meant. I also argue that his secular humanism was largely responsible*

*for guiding his thoughts on religion, and at times became the position to which he ascribed most dogmatically.*

A MAINSTAY OF CONTEMPORARY DEBATE OVER THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE is the invocation of the founders' personal faith. Given that the religious convictions of the founders were hardly uniform and that the role of religion at the time of the founding was much different than it is today, the usefulness and relevance of this question may be disputed. Nevertheless, it remains a source of much public interest and is worth exploring, if not to tell us what the role of religion should be today, then at least to provide context for the philosophy behind the founding of a state with an entirely original relationship to religion and religious freedom. Central to such an investigation is Thomas Jefferson, whose contributions to the founding cannot be overstated, and whose writings on religion range from asserting man's God-given rights in the Declaration of Independence to proclaiming the "wall of separation" between church and state, which influences Constitutional interpretation to this day.

Though both atheists and Christians frequently claim Thomas Jefferson, he eludes categorization. As with every other topic, Jefferson meditated on religion deeply and produced an extraordinary body of writing about his beliefs in correspondence with friends (frequently theologians themselves), as well as in his advice to family members. His compilation of selected passages from the New Testament into a personal codex, colloquially known as *The Jefferson Bible*, further illuminates his feelings on the moral as well as spiritual components of Christianity. Ever the rationalist, Jefferson sought reason in religion and favored reason whenever the two seemed in conflict. He was a materialist, but he did not reject offhand the teachings of Christ as did many of his European counterparts. He earned a reputation as hostile to religion generally through his dogged insistence on keeping religious sectarianism out of public life. Even so, his study of the history of religion in public life equipped him to engage in theological discourse with the most celebrated thinkers of his day. His opinions on the topic became, at points, zealotry of their own, taking on the character of devotional beliefs to which he would

automatically turn. To engage with Jefferson on the topic of religion is to engage with some of Jefferson's most thorough and serious contemplation.

Jefferson's parents almost certainly baptized him as an Anglican, and he became a vestryman or parish leader of the local Anglican Church, a position his father held which was largely reserved for the local gentry in colonial Virginia. Jefferson's children were baptized and, like him, married here. He recorded all of these occasions studiously in his Anglican Book of Common Prayer, which his children noted he carried with him frequently.<sup>1</sup> Jefferson studied as a child under religious authorities such as the Reverends William Douglas and James Maury, and his education included the standard Biblical teachings of the time. His acquaintance with Enlightenment humanism began at William & Mary, and his literary commonplace book lists two entries from this time quoting the English political philosopher Henry St. John Bolingbroke criticizing religious faith. The young Jefferson found two statements compelling enough to record: first, "We must not assume for truth, what can be proved neither a priori, nor a posteriori . . . and inspiration is become a mystery, since all we know of it is, that it is an inexplicable action of the divine on the human mind[.] [I]t would be silly therefore, to assume it to be true," and second, "It is absurd to affirm that a god sovereignly good, and at the same time almighty and alwise [sic], suffers an inferior dependent being to deface his work in any sort, and to make his other creatures both criminal and miserable."<sup>2</sup>

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Despite these misgivings, at age 20, Jefferson wrote a letter to a friend, John Page, in which he advised, "Assume a perfect resignation to the Divine will, to consider whatever does happen, must happen; . . . till we arrive at our journey's end, when we may deliver up our trust into the hands of him who gave it, and receive such reward as to him shall seem proportioned to our merit."<sup>3</sup> It seems that while Jefferson opened the door to skepticism through his readings and discussions at William & Mary, he did not fully embrace the anti-theological positions he encountered there. Jefferson's quotations of Bolingbroke, though perhaps not indicative of full endorsement, were not a passing intrigue either. He would continue throughout his life to regard Bolingbroke as an important thinker, and this early encounter with the anti-religious writer may have prompted Jefferson to consider picking at the problems he found in religion more extensively, if not to wholeheartedly embrace Bolingbroke's rational deism.

By 1774, Jefferson had committed fully to the Enlightenment concept of "natural rights," which had developed as a theory to oppose the "divine right" of kings to absolute rule that characterized previous centuries.<sup>4</sup> Jefferson incorporated this idea into the language of his *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, writing, "The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time: the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them."<sup>5</sup> The moral clarity of these arguments as well as Jefferson's skill at writing, among other practical considerations, led to his appointment to the Committee of Five and the eventual decision that he write the Declaration of Independence. To this task, Jefferson brought the same conviction he had to the *Summary*, and he famously wrote that all men are "endowed by their creator with [inherent and] inalienable rights."<sup>6</sup> This phrase and the enumerated rights have since formed the basis of the United States as an

idea. Jefferson's understanding of natural rights, though influenced by other philosophers and in the case of the Declaration of Independence, cut almost whole cloth from John Locke, was rooted in his own ideas about the nature of the God that had given humans the rights he claimed.

For Jefferson, God had granted man the great gift of reason, and a failure to use that gift was akin to defiling the sacred.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Jefferson found reason to be so at the heart of what he considered the divine, that he read the Greek "λόγος" or "*Logos*" in John 1:1, typically translated "The Word," as "Reason" or "Mind."<sup>8</sup> He therefore insisted that the proper translation was in fact, "In the beginning God existed, and reason was with God, and that reason was God."<sup>9</sup> The religious and the rational were so tightly knit in Jefferson's mind so as to be almost indistinguishable. It followed, therefore, that man's own moral reasoning was not only sufficient for questions of ethics and good government, but was, in fact, the sacred basis for morality as a whole. The extent to which a government trespassed on and suppressed the ability of man to decide the answers to moral questions for himself was the extent, in Jefferson's view, of tyranny. Considering Jefferson's devotion to the idea of divinely gifted moral reasoning, it would not be a stretch to say that the Declaration of Independence was, if not a religious document itself, a document that outlined Jefferson's own religious convictions.

Jefferson's observation and comparison of the immoral yet civilized French court versus the moral yet uneducated Virginia frontiersmen and his respect for the wisdom of Indian tribal councils strengthened his idea of man's innate moral sense. His ideal vision of man was not the noble savage in a state of pure nature Jean-Jacques Rousseau articulated. Rather, Jefferson held the more moderate stance that the rural yeoman was more in touch with the innate moral sensibility than the cosmopolitan urbanite.<sup>10</sup> In an 1816 letter to John Adams, Jefferson wrote that he disagreed with "the principle of [Thomas] Hobbes, that justice is founded in contract solely, and does not result from the construction of man." "I believe, on the contrary, that it is instinct, and innate . . . as a wise creator must have seen to be necessary in an animal destined to live in society," he commented.<sup>11</sup> Pragmatic as always, Jefferson took a stand in between the great opposing forces of Hobbes and Rousseau, believing, as did the former, that man's destiny was to live in society. He simultaneously thought, as did the latter, that a life too far removed from nature and the land was unhealthy for the soul. It makes sense then that Jefferson's understanding of morality would most accommodate the utilitarianism of David Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment.

Jefferson's idea of utility was not a pure calculation of human material welfare, however, but rather included the idea that doing good toward others would nourish man's moral consciousness and subsequently increase his happiness.<sup>12</sup> In the same letter to Adams, he wrote, "Virtue does not consist in the act we do, but in the end it is to effect . . . The essence of virtue is in doing good to others."<sup>13</sup> This moral code understood the differences between acts committed in different societies and contexts while also encompassing certain moral truths Jefferson considered, and empirically found, to be universals such as a prohibition on murder. Jefferson's foremost concern in matters of both government and religion was ethics and morality, though his sense of civic spirituality often blurred the line between these.

Jefferson was profoundly uninterested in dogma and spirituality and saw religion as above all a source of moral guidance. In a country as religiously diverse as the United

States, sectarian differences only fostered division. Jefferson went so far as to outline this specifically as a point of contention he had with Jesus, writing, “I am a Materialist; he takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin; I require a counterpoise of good works.”<sup>14</sup> Knowing the teachings and believing them meant very little in Jefferson’s mind if they did not prepare one to act in the service of humanity as a result.

Though he repudiated many of the supernatural doctrines of Christianity, Jefferson did not simply consider himself a deist, and he wrote, “I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call me infidel . . . They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the great reformer . . . would not recognize one feature.”<sup>15</sup> Although many would consider it a stretch to maintain that Christianity is still a religion once excised of all supernatural components and reduced to a moral code, Jefferson certainly had no misgivings calling it one. He blamed the move away from what he saw as the pure moral teachings of Jesus to superstitious sectarianism as a result of “the whimsies of Plato’s own foggy brain,”<sup>16</sup> and the misleading teachings of Paul, whom he referred to as “first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup> As a materialist, Jefferson found Plato’s philosophy of abstract metaphysical ideals contrary to reason, and believed that it was in some part responsible for the development of esoteric ideas like the trinity, which caused unnecessary division among the Christians of Europe and America.

Jefferson laid the development of a tradition involving transubstantiation, original sin, resurrection, a virgin birth, and other implausible ideas at the feet of Paul, who taught Jesus’ divinity, and all the theologians of subsequent centuries who expanded on the tradition. Not many Christians, at least not those in Jefferson’s America, could properly say they thought the tradition went wrong with Paul, but Jefferson professed to be a Christian despite holding just this belief. His criticism of spiritual doctrine went all the way to John Calvin, whom Jefferson said “introduced into the Christian religion more new absurdities than [he] had purged it of old ones.”<sup>18</sup> If Calvin’s doctrine of predestination was to be believed, then God was a “daemon of malignant spirit,” Jefferson said.<sup>19</sup> Such ideas were anathema to Jefferson because of both their unreasonableness and their presumption to condescend to the people on matters of God. This did not only violate Jefferson’s belief that religion should be compatible with reason, but it was also fundamentally undemocratic in its ordering authoritative and elite scholars above the laypeople. As in government, Jefferson was a fierce democrat on matters of the soul.

Jefferson carried his opposition to religious authority over into public life in his insistence on both religious freedom and governmental neutrality on religious affairs, as well as through his advice to family and friends and his role in creating the University of Virginia. As Governor of Virginia in 1779, Jefferson made enemies with traditionalists when he replaced the two professorships of divinity at William & Mary with one in Science and one in Law.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the late 1700s, various religious communities chartered the construction of assorted denominational universities and colleges across the country. This was and had been the primary means of securing funding for higher education, and Jefferson, noticing the trend, wished to establish a secular federal university, by constitutional amendment if necessary.<sup>21</sup> Though this plan never came to fruition, Jefferson advocated in 1816 for the government takeover of Dartmouth College, which The Crown had chartered as a Congregationalist college in 1769.<sup>22</sup> Jefferson felt



that Dartmouth, as the only college in New Hampshire, ought to be more open to all the citizens of the state, which its sectarian affiliations ostensibly prevented. The Supreme Court case *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* eventually defeated New Hampshire's attempt to seize the college, but the example serves to illustrate Jefferson's zealotry on the matter of secularism not only in government but also in education.<sup>23</sup> He finally managed to accomplish this with his involvement in establishing the University of Virginia. Delivering his plans to the Virginia House of Delegates, Jefferson said, "We have proposed no professor of Divinity . . . We have thought it proper to leave every sect to provide, as they think fittest, the means of further instruction in their own peculiar tenets."<sup>24</sup>

Jefferson's ardent secularism got him into trouble even in this most personal of missions. When he appointed Thomas Cooper, a radical Unitarian, to be professor of Law and Chemistry at the nascent Central College, Jefferson faced furious backlash from members of Virginia's religious establishment, particularly the Presbyterians, who were a particularly well-educated sect. This apparent intolerance incensed Jefferson, who wrote to Cooper, "They are violent, ambitious of power, and intolerant in politics as in religion . . . jealous of the general diffusion of science, and therefore hostile to our Seminary, lest it should qualify their Antagonists of the other sects to meet them in equal combat."<sup>25</sup> Angry at the Presbyterians for blocking Cooper's appointment, Jefferson ascribed to them the motive of wanting a monopoly on education in the State, which the University would surely end. Whether this was just an accusation made in the heat of the moment or a legitimate reflection of Jefferson's feelings about the power-hungry nature of sects, the latter position would certainly not have been out of character.

His behavior in dealing with higher education might lead one to assume that Jefferson would have opposed any discussion of religion when raising children. Perhaps surprisingly, Jefferson actually worried about the effect that the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Virginia would have on the moral fiber of the State's citizens. He believed that a secular, that is to say religiously neutral, education system would have to fill the vacuum left by the abolition of an official Church. Planning out the system of public education that Jefferson envisioned solving this problem, he in fact supported teaching the existence of a Creator and Supreme Ruler of the universe, which he believed was sufficiently secular as it was presumably nondenominational.<sup>26</sup> One of the most important goals here was, of course, to instill moral values, and Jefferson felt that doing so would necessarily involve drawing on religious sources of morality as well as nonreligious traditions such as those from ancient classical philosophers.

This was a remarkably modern concept of how to treat religion in public education, and though Jefferson undoubtedly thought out this approach with Christianity at the forefront of moral education, he wished also to instruct children in morality through the lessons of history, and the varied approaches different cultures took throughout time.<sup>27</sup> The principal concern here, again, was sectarianism. While in France, Jefferson had sent his daughters to a Catholic nunnery for their education under the condition that "not a word is ever spoken to them on the subject of religion."<sup>28</sup> Such a claim was bold coming from a nunnery, but Jefferson apparently believed it. The apparent contradiction between Jefferson's insistence on secular education and his advocacy for teaching religion in school may be resolved by unpacking just what Jefferson meant by "religion." Whereas in the present day, we might very well think that teaching children the existence of a divine Creator would constitute religious education, Jefferson's understanding of "religion"



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seems to have aligned more with what we might call “sectarianism.” Jefferson expanded on this definition of religion in correspondence with John Adams, writing:

If by *religion* we are to understand *sectarian dogmas*, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation on them is just, “that this world would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it.” But if the moral precepts, innate in man, and made a part of his physical constitution, as necessary for a social being, if the sublime doctrines of philanthropism and deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth, in which all agree, constitute true religion, then without it, this would be, as you again say, “something not fit to be named even, indeed, a hell.”<sup>29</sup>

It would be easy to misunderstand Jefferson’s feelings on religion without this definition, which delineates, perhaps exaggeratedly, between a perfect world and an existence worse than hell on earth. The importance of this point is difficult to overstate, and it explains Jefferson’s impassioned feelings about institutional neutrality as well as his understanding of moral force as nothing less than a necessity.

It was because of his feelings on the tyrannical nature of sectarianism that Jefferson worked throughout his career to make sure that the law barred despotic forces of any individual church from wielding the sword of government. Jefferson described the historical alliance of these forces by saying, “The purest system of morals ever before preached to man has been adulterated & sophisticated, by artificial constructions, into a mere contrivance to filch wealth & power to themselves . . . and do, in fact, constitute the real anti-Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Anti-Christ in this instance, while referencing the beast from Revelations in a tongue-in-cheek manner, also describes what Jefferson saw as the antithesis of Christ’s teachings.

Objection to the institution of one belief system over another aside, Jefferson worried about the potential for corruption and abuse, the threat of which an appeal to divine authority only magnified. When asked about the variety of religions in the state, Jefferson took the opportunity in *Notes on the State of Virginia* to expand on this point and indeed spent most of his answer delivering a philippic against established religion rather than specifically answering the question. He says, in part:

Reason and experiment have been indulged, and error has fled before them. It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself. Subject opinion to coercion: whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men, governed by bad passions, by private as well as public reasons. And why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face or stature . . . Difference of opinion is advantageous to religion . . . The effect of coercion has been to make one half of the world fools, and the other half hypocrites.<sup>31</sup>

Echoing the confidence in truth’s ability to overcome falsehood and evil when pitted on an even plane expressed in John Milton’s *Areopagitica*, Jefferson claims that the only conceivable outcome of an establishment of religion would be to instate a tool for the forces of falsehood and evil to exploit. Jefferson authored the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which disestablished the Anglican Church to seal off this possibility that and ensure religious freedom for “the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.”<sup>32</sup>



The level of religious freedom the Virginia Statute granted was radical for its time. Though Enlightenment philosophers had increasingly pushed for tolerance in Europe, complete neutrality was an even more extreme position. John Locke, for instance, had not advocated for treating atheists or Catholics the same as Protestant Christians.<sup>33</sup> While it may be easy to take the statute for granted looking back, especially given its similarity to the Establishment clause in the Constitution, it was a truly revolutionary move, and one that Jefferson was especially proud of. Jefferson willed that after his death, the authorship of this statute would join the writing the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the University of Virginia on his gravestone.<sup>34</sup> This shows both the importance Jefferson placed on religious freedom as well as his estimation of the achievement that the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom actually was.

Although the jurisprudence surrounding Establishment clause doctrine has and continues to be fleshed out by the courts, Jefferson contributed perhaps the most well-known extrajudicial comment on the matter in a letter responding to an association of Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut. The Baptists had written to congratulate Jefferson on winning the election as well as to express their support of religious freedom and their worry about not having an express guarantee to such in their own state Constitution.<sup>35</sup> As a minority sect in a state populated by a Congregationalist majority, the Baptists wrote to Jefferson, “We are . . . sensible that the national government cannot destroy the laws of each State, but our hopes are strong that the sentiment of our beloved President . . . like the radiant beams of the sun, will shine and prevail through all these States.”<sup>36</sup> Jefferson’s response to the Baptists reassured them of his commitment to religious freedom and stated his now-famous position, which would come to influence greatly the interpretation of the Establishment clause of the First Amendment. He wrote:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.<sup>37</sup>

What exactly Jefferson meant by the “wall of separation” is open to interpretation, and he seems to have made decisions and held opinions that could cut either way in informing this position. For instance, Jefferson believed that the country’s seal should include an expression of Christian belief, though one imagines that this could only have been in the vaguest possible terms.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Jefferson so harshly opposed the possibility of institutional religion that he at one point suggested that the government prohibit ministers from holding public office. He retreated from this position at the urging of James Madison, who argued that although the Constitution surely prevented the government from establishing an official religion, prohibiting individual religious officials from holding public office would violate their own individual rights as citizens. Jefferson appears to have accepted this argument, although he felt, external to his beliefs about the meaning of the Constitution, it was inappropriate to discuss politics in the pulpit and that ministers who did so were betraying their flock and should be fired.<sup>39</sup> Again, Jefferson’s opinions on the degree to which the government could or could not express religious affiliation are coherent when



framed in the context of his pragmatism. While a Christian seal may seem, *prima facie*, to undermine Jefferson's wall, it is entirely possible that he felt that such a thing posed no threat. On the other hand, Jefferson's apparent fanaticism, that is to say his atypical stubbornness, on the point of ministers in public office is understandable given his knowledge and fear of the history of church-state alliance in Europe and indeed, across the world.

This pragmatism extended to many of Jefferson's feelings about specific beliefs and their consequences. For instance, Jefferson described the matter of an afterlife as, "an important incentive supplementary to the other motives to moral conduct" in an extended reflection on the teachings of Jesus.<sup>40</sup> Though he did in fact appear to believe in an afterlife, Jefferson's reaction to the idea as a moral precept was simply an estimate

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of its potential for persuasion. He did not, however, think it strictly necessary for moral behavior. Though not an atheist himself, Jefferson defended certain atheists whom he regarded as morally upstanding individuals. Their existence implied that morality and faith, while frequently coinciding, were not strictly dependent on one another. He inquired, "If we did a good act merely from the love of God . . . whence arises the morality of the Atheist? . . . [Denis] Diderot, [Jean le Rond] D'Alembert, [Baron] D'Holbach, [Nicolas de] Condorcet are known to have been among the most virtuous of men. Their virtue, then, must have had some other foundation than the love of God."<sup>41</sup> To declare oneself an atheist at this time, though increasingly acceptable within the narrow circles of urban European salons, was still regarded widely as an admission of moral failure. Jefferson's open-mindedness on this topic was partially a result of his familiarity with this culture and these ideas, but clearly also came from his own need to reckon with the question of the source of morality. Declaring that atheists were by definition immoral would, beyond running contrary to Jefferson's own experience, simply have been a dishonest way to avoid exploring the question.

Jefferson adverted to reason as the source of ethics, as with much else. He viewed the pursuit of truth as an intrinsically moral exercise and advised his nephew, Peter Carr, to come to his own conclusions on the matter of God, writing, "If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you will feel in its exercise, and the host of others which it will procure you . . . Your own reason is the only oracle given you by Heaven and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness, of the decision."<sup>42</sup> To presuppose a conclusion to one's own reasoning would defeat the point of the exercise. To Jefferson, virtue existed in the honest consideration of a question, the final answer to which was entirely immaterial as long as one used reason to arrive at it. Jefferson's advice to Peter, who was only 17 at the time, shows that Jefferson was not only willing to defend atheism on an abstract scale but also to positively support atheism if it was a product of reason. As Jefferson believed that reason lay at the foundation of both morality and truth, he far preferred a

reasonable atheist to a confused Christian. Even so, Jefferson saw a merit in Christianity as a philosophy that many of the European atheists did not, although he wished to excise as much superstition from it as he possibly could.

Despite rejecting Christ's divinity, Jefferson considered him to be the greatest moral teacher known to mankind and held him in as high regard as he was capable of holding any human. He praised Jesus for "the innocence of his character, the purity and sublimity of his moral precepts, the eloquence of his inculcations, the beauty of the apologues in which he conveys them."<sup>43</sup> Declaring this man, whom Jefferson saw as having achieved the apex of human morality and character, to be divine was to steal the credit from human reason and to place the possibility of reaching that state outside of man's ken. Jefferson wished to rectify this undesirable state of affairs by re-humanizing Christ, whom he saw as defiled by priests and apostles.<sup>44</sup> The writings of his friend the English scientist Joseph Priestley, whose work *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* Jefferson read multiple times throughout his life, heavily influenced his feelings on this matter. Jefferson would come to describe Jesus as polluted by "priestcraft," and wrote that "the world will see, after the fogs shall be dispelled, in which for 14. centuries he has been enveloped by Jugglers to make money of him, when the genuine character shall be exhibited, which they have dressed up in the rags of an Impostor, the world, I say, will at length see the immortal merit of this first of human Sages."<sup>45</sup> Jefferson's feelings about Christ's preeminence as a moral teacher came by comparing him to other sources with which he was familiar. This included the Jews who came before Christ as well as the Stoics of ancient Rome, whose philosophy Jefferson said "related chiefly to ourselves, and the government of those passions which, unrestrained, would disturb our tranquility." He continued, "In this branch of philosophy they were really great. In developing our duties to others, they were short and defective . . . Still less have they inculcated peace, charity and love to our fellow men, or embraced with benevolence the whole family of mankind."<sup>46</sup> Jefferson did not believe that a moral system that only taught virtues governing the inner mind could provide all the guidance necessary for humanity, however enlightening it otherwise may have been. Nor did he believe, as some in his era did, that a code of self-interest would produce the best outcomes for all of society, and to whatever degree it did, it was based on rotten foundations.

In order to sort out his own thoughts on Christian moral philosophy, Jefferson set himself to the task of editing the New Testament, specifically the Four Gospels, to create "a wee little book . . . which I call the Philosophy of Jesus: it is a paradigm [sic] of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book . . . A more beautiful or more precious morsel of ethics I have never seen."<sup>47</sup> Jefferson finally completed this compendium, called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, in 1820, though he had put together a less comprehensive version several years earlier. His own moral reasoning was apparently the sole methodology for selecting which quotations and stories were legitimate and which were not. He explained that the real passages were obvious, alternately referring to the process of sorting them as "gold from the dross", "grain from the chaff", and finally, "diamonds in a dunghill."<sup>48</sup> In correspondence with close friends, Jefferson references reading these books before bed every night, though he seems not to have talked about them even with his family; his grandchildren only discovered the books' existence after his death.<sup>49</sup> Although this extreme privacy was in line with much of what Jefferson had said when discussing religion in public life, his apparent secrecy on the matter demonstrates his personal sincerity on this point and possibly indicates a


moral code of his own. Whether this was a matter of principle or just a feeling that such things were unimportant to discuss, Jefferson's silence on the matter outside of intellectual conversation shows the seriousness of his commitment not to preach to others on divine affairs.

Jefferson's life seems to vindicate the claim that his Christianity truly was lived out in action more than in faith, which he actively eschewed. His disbelief in the supernatural claims of religion acted as a positive belief in its own right. When asked to serve as the godfather for his friend Phillip Mazzei's stepson-in-law's child, Jefferson declined, commenting, "The person who becomes sponsor for a child, according to the ritual of the church in which I was educated, makes a solemn profession, before god and the world, of faith in articles, which I had never sense enough to comprehend."<sup>50</sup> Whereas most people, then and today, would agree to take part in the cultural ritual of godfatherhood out of a sense of duty to their friend, even if they did not necessarily profess belief in all the teachings of the church, Jefferson felt compelled to decline out of a sense that he would be betraying his own beliefs by taking part. Some orthodox responsibility to a different sect might better explain this behavior, but for Jefferson it was a personal orthodoxy to forswear taking part in such rituals.

Insofar as Jefferson professed to follow a specific sect, he preferred the Unitarianism of his friends Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper to anything else on offer. The Unitarians' rejection of Christ's divinity, predestination, original sin, and other metaphysical claims aligned largely with Jefferson's own feelings. He was not a member of an official congregation, however, and wrote in 1822, "I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."<sup>51</sup> More than just personally rejecting articles of faith such as the Trinity, Jefferson seemed almost offended by how widely held such beliefs were. In private he ridiculed such positions and expressed that he would be satisfied once the world had "done away the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus."<sup>52</sup> This makes sense when one considers that Jefferson believed that such beliefs were in zero-sum competition with what he saw as the real virtue in religion. The more one focused on abstract spirituality, the less one devoted himself to the proper gifts of God in the human mind, and the less one actually accomplished to make earthly life better. Trying to understand God's nature as a being seemed a fruitless task to Jefferson who said, "Of the nature of this being we know nothing,"<sup>53</sup> and who further believed that really, nothing could be known about God.

Jefferson's relationship with religion is not a simple matter to grasp. He defies the superficial labeling that was, in his own era, often used to smear his character and which is frequently used in contemporary discussion to bolster the claims of one belief system over another. To call Jefferson a Christian is accurate but incomplete.. The essence of his belief and the focus of his conviction was in the power of man, using his rational faculties, to learn more about the universe and to do good to his fellow creatures.

This understanding was the closest thing Jefferson had to a conception of the divine, and whatever his specific feelings about other details were, they were secondary to this. His rejection of religion as an institution came from the worry that clerical intermediaries would only interfere in the connection that all thinking humans could achieve with a moral sense.

The teachings of religion were an imperfect rendering of man's innate moral character, rather than the other way around. Above all, Jefferson believed that man needed the liberty and independence to pursue this natural impulse for himself. 

## NOTES

1. John A. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom: Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 9.
2. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, 10-11.
3. Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to John Page, July 15, 1763," in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1: 9-11. Hereinafter *Papers*, ed. Boyd.
4. Charles B. Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1987), 19.
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